



## **HHFT Steering Committee Meeting**

Date: July 19, 2023

Time: 10 am - 12 PM

Location: Scenic Hudson's River Center at Long Dock Park, Beacon, NY

### **Attendees:**

Virtually: Andrew Chmar, HHFT Board of Directors, Emily Lynn Provonsha, Metro-North Railroad, and Robyn Hollander, Metro-North Railroad

In-Person:

Brian Grahn, Little Stony Point Citizens Association; Linde Ostro, Riverkeeper; Evan Thompson, NYS OPRHP; Hank Osborn, NY-NJ Trail Conference; Katrina Shindledecker, Hudson Highlands Land Trust; Kyle Buser, NYS Department of Transportation; Lance MacMillan, NYS Department of Transportation; Matt Davidson, NYS OPRHP; Nancy Montgomery, Putnam County Legislator; Nancy Stoner, NYS OPRHP; Maria Zhynovitch, Trustee for Village of Nelsonville; Eliza Starbuck, Trustee for Village of Cold Spring; Chelsea Anderson and Elizabeth Brouhard; About the Work.

Hudson Highlands Fjord Trail: Amy Kacala, Executive Director; MJ Martin, Director of Development and Community Outreach; Rob Rusnack, Director of Finance and Operations; Lori Moss, Communications Manager; Emily Selover, Communications Associate; and Diana DiMuro, Office Manager.

### **AGENDA:**

#### **Welcome (10 min.)**

#### **Updates (60 min.):**

- June 30th Ribbon-Cutting at Breakneck
- Trail First Approach
- New Phasing Plan (including imminent closures at Breakneck)
- Community Input Process
  - Local Protect the Highlands group
  - Community outreach events
  - Visitation Data Committee
  - Fall public meeting series
  - GEIS public comment period

#### **Discussion & Input (50 min.)**

#### **Adjourn**

## **Updates given by HHFT Executive Director, Amy Kacala:**

Upper Overlook was completed for the July 1st opening. A ribbon-cutting ceremony was held on June 30, 2023. Improvements included: stabilization of the current trail route near the scramble, new stairs, closure of unauthorized social trails, and a new Trail Steward Station, with green roof plantings to happen this fall.

## **Trail First Approach**

A "Trail First " design approach was recently announced - building trail and entry points (parking, bathrooms, etc.) first. HHFT has solicited and received a significant amount of community input over the past two years through more than 20 public meetings and events, as well as small/focused group conversations to inform this approach. It is hoped that a "Trail First" implementation, which holds off on adding any program spaces that could generate new visits, will alleviate local anxiety over increased visitation. Programming, like "forest nets," outdoor classroom/program space, natural playground, and swimming at Little Stony Point (LSP), will not be contemplated at this time but could be added in the future if it served a community demand or visitor management need. If/when those program areas are planned, each would have to undertake its own environmental review as they will not be covered in the GEIS.

Dutchess Manor is part of the plan as a future visitors center, but its environmental review will go through the Town of Fishkill as it is private land subject to local planning board approval.

**Question:** What programming will be installed at LSP? There was a lot of interest/excitement about the outdoor classroom and swimming area.

**Answer:** HHFT will still make some improvements at LSP including trail stabilization, removing exposed tree roots and work to make accessibility improvements. The natural playground may be considered for another location. We realize there is some disappointment that these programming pieces will not be moving forward right now, but they can be considered and brought before the community for input at a later date.

**Comment:** There is local anxiety that the entrance to the Fjord Trail at Dockside Park will draw more traffic to a park that is used by the locals. The community is afraid it will become like Bear Mountain State Park with an influx of tourists coming off the train.

**Response:** In answer to this, Amy Kacala skipped ahead to the planned workshop series that will dig deeper into the routes through the Village.

## **Community Input Process**

### **Public Meetings**

HHFT will hold a series of meetings this fall:

- Meeting 1: Alternative Routes Considered in the Village
- Meeting 2: Visitor Projections and Visitation Management Options

- Meeting 3: Putting it all together - modeling visitor movement in the village along different routes/scenarios

### **Data Committee**

A Visitation Data Committee is being formed with representatives from all project area communities. The goal of the committee is to review and “kick the tires” on data gathering methodology, analysis, and projections. The committee will have access to their own consultant for technical guidance.

### **Discussion:**

**Q:** Would HHFT consider having members from the “Protect the Highlands” group on the Visitation Data Committee rather than leaving it up to the municipal leaders to choose participants?

**A:** Protect the Highlands is a grassroots group that represents a small subset (less than 1%) of the project area population. A representative model based in democratic process seems the best course, otherwise why pick this group and exclude others that might be interested? Also note, there is at least one representative on the committee who is also a PTH member so that perspective will be represented.

**Q:** How are the municipalities picking the Data Committee members?

**A:** Each community is taking a different approach - some are simply appointing government representatives, others have recruited residents with specific expertise. Cold Spring has posted a job description and called for applicants and will appoint from that pool of candidates.

### **Protect the Highlands**

The committee discussed the Protect the Highlands group, their methods, and key issues with the project.

Methods include:

- Personal outreach to pressure Steering Committee members (staff and board members) to leave the committee.
- Outreach to delegation members. Pressure on local officials.
- Spread of misinformation on data like visitation projections (e.g., incorrect data “600K NEW visitors” versus correct context “total inclusive of 480K currently coming”), environmental impacts, cost impacts, etc.
- Attacks on leadership, donors, staff, and on other residents who come to HHFT’s defense. This has been particularly prevalent on social media, but also in their paid ads.
- Unfounded “what-if” scenarios with the intent of raising local anxiety (millions of visitors all coming through the village, bumper cars, etc).

**C:** A person in the Protect the Highlands group said that they knew some of the information being promoted about HHFT was false, but they were afraid the rest of the group would turn on them if they spoke up.

**R:** Our goal is to create opportunities for the people who legitimately want to engage with us about the project to be able to, instead of catering to a small group of people who are hardened in their view.

**C:** The Protect the Highlands group has been particularly targeting members of the HHFT Steering Committee in an attempt to pressure them to leave the committee.

**R:** HHFT is aware of this and acknowledges that members of the Steering Committee have been impacted negatively by the opposition and we want to hear Steering Committee concerns so we can help and support you.

**C:** The presentation by Pete Salmohanson at Saw Mill River Audubon Society was very disappointing in that it attempted to lead people to false conclusions of impact. It was unfortunate and irresponsible.

**R:** It was suggested that Audubon let HHFT come present to the group and move the conversation forward to help correct any misinformation about impacts to endangered species, etc.

**C:** No big project is ever going to make all people happy. We need to keep moving forward with this well-designed and well-supported project.

**Q:** Is there a “Pro” Fjord Trail group?

**A:** Yes, there is an independent grassroots group in formation in favor of HHFT that has quickly grown from 12 members to almost 100 people. Representatives from that group will be attending HHFT’s Community Day Event on July 22nd. They are organizing their efforts independently but are in regular communication with staff.

**C:** A local resident noted that some tourists of color at a local establishment were made very uncomfortable because they were seated near a table of Protect the Highlands group members who were having a meeting and were able to overhear some of their discussion. It might not be intentional, but there is an unspoken undertone to the objectives of some of the Protect the Highlands group that is less than welcoming. Diversity of the area comes from tourism.

**R:** HHFT’s goal is to create a safe and inclusive space for people to access the outdoors.

### **New Project Phasing Plan**

There is sensitivity toward concerns about increased visitation at Dockside Park so HHFT will concentrate on Phase 1 and Phase 2a (Breakneck to LSP) then consider Phase 2b based on community dialog. HHFT wants to give some attention to Beacon, NY. This phasing plan is on the HHFT website and will be updated as it changes. It was suggested to add a “subject to change” statement be written on the phasing map for clarity/expectation setting.

**Q:** Will the HHFT Steering Committee be given more advance notice moving forward of future project changes (e.g. “Trail First” Approach) before HHFT releases a press release so that the Steering Committee can be better prepared to answer the public’s questions?

**A:** Yes. It had been our intent to do this with the “Trail First” announcement. We provided a press release to the *Highlands Current* to meet their deadline for Friday publication and they unexpectedly turned it into a digital article overnight for their online edition. We will now not assume these announcements will go on the print cycle first.

**Q:** How will closures of trailheads, roadside parking, and the Breakneck train station be publicized during construction?

**A:** We will work with partners to have that information well publicized in advance of closure, including suggestions for alternate trails to visit.

**Q:** Will Trail Stewards be needed at Breakneck if the trail and train station are closed?

**A:** NYNJTC Stewards will still very much be needed during times of trail closures. They will be positioned further up the mountain to ensure people don't descend into the construction zone.

**Q:** Central Hudson Gas & Electric will need to move utility poles and wants an easement with NYS parks. Will that work disrupt the trail closures this fall?

**A:** HHFT is working with several agencies on permitting for the project and have established bi-weekly meetings with the NYC Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the NYS Department of Transportation (DOT) to keep things on schedule.

**C:** NYS Parks announced that the public comment period on a Breakneck permit closes in a week or so. Opportunity to comment was noticed in the *Poughkeepsie Journal* newspaper.

**R:** HHFT will post a public announcement on its website (hhft.org).

**Q:** Can HHFT provide talking points to Steering Committee members so we are prepared for questions that may arise and so that committee members can answer or direct people appropriately?

**A:** Yes.

### **DEP/Aqueduct Discussion**

The topic of the DEP building and aqueduct undergoing renovations for stormwater management was discussed. Work will commence in fall 2025. The DEP is partnering with HHFT and NYS Parks on the building of the bridge to give the facility a major upgrade as it is part of the Catskill Aqueduct system for New York City. It is a 3-year construction project. The DEP will need to use the bridge to work on improvements to the facility. The southern portion of the trail will not be connected to the bridge until upgrades have been completed.

The DEP has two separate projects: renovating the structure itself and working on cleaning out the aqueduct for better drainage; they will have to schedule a 2-week period to shut off water to perform the work. It will be the first time the facility has been maintained since the early 1900s.

**C:** There is some confusion circulating that the bridge is being built over NY Route 9-D. It is not. It is a bridge over the railroad tracks. Unclear where this confusion came from.

There are new design renderings being developed for Breakneck and Bridge. When they are done, we can circulate to the Steering Committee.

Not all of the landscaping will be as mature as featured in the renderings from day one. Thousands of new plants, shrubs and trees will be added, but they will need time to become established. We'll need to communicate about this so people know how day one will look versus year five. HHFT is also working with SCAPE Landscape Architecture and NYS Parks on some invasive species remediations planned for before and during construction.

### **Dutchess Manor**

HHFT is working with Stephen Tilly Architects to restore the original building, remove wings and create staff offices and a Visitors Center, where there will be parking and a shuttle pick up/drop-off point. Phase 1 of Dutchess Manor renovations include: restoring the original building of the manor and adding ramps and an elevator for ADA compliance. Historic tours of the building will be given on Saturday, July 22nd at our Community Day Event.

### **Outreach**

Public information and discussion events have been positive. HHFT has been holding "Walk & Talk" events at various project area locations and "Chats" at Hubbard Lodge to answer questions and give clarification on misinformation. Our pace for community events has been one - two per month.

### **Fall Public Meeting Series**

HHFT is working with a consultant, AKRF, for the environmental review process. They are processing data and conducting projections of traffic counts. ORCA is our visitation data consultant. They have worked on projects ranging from Muir Woods to the Statue of Liberty. They have been very engaged, working on holidays like Memorial Day and July 4th weekend to visit high volume areas to observe behavior. They have also spent lots of time in the Village of Cold Spring.

**Q:** Are the sidewalks on NY Route 9D and Fair Street in Cold Spring still on the table?

**A:** HHFT is willing to expand Fair Street sidewalks. They will use the fall public meeting series to get community input. NY-9D is a DOT road and there are some topographical challenges. Sidewalks there have not been in our planning to date.

**Q:** Will seniors and members of the disabled population be included in your focus groups? As I age, I've been thinking more about staying active in the future when I can't hike the trails that I used to.

**A:** An ADA consultant has looked at HHFT's draft master plan to make recommendations and HHFT is going to convene a focus group of local stakeholders to discuss those recommendations or other ideas on how the trail can be more accessible and welcoming to users of different abilities.

A restoration ecologist is also being brought into the project and HHFT is going to reconvene the ecology working group to weigh in on the project. This group has informed design decisions in the past.

**Q:** Has data been released yet from ORCA (Visitation Data Consultant)?

**A:** ORCA's notes are currently documenting weather-related and seasonal trends. For example, more visitors were observed hiking in May than July, though in July, more visitors were going to Little Stony Point or Long Dock Park to access the river. ORCA will be looking at fall visitation in October 2023. They are collecting data on people coming off the train to help with train station and Breakneck Connector design decisions so they will meet visitation needs and visitor behaviors. Online surveys and in-person interviews are currently being conducted by ORCA. They have spoken to the locals who run the Cold Spring tourism visitors booth who provided a lot of great insight.

**C:** ORCA could also speak with business owners, the Putnam History Museum, and other locals with decades long history of the area's tourism and how it has changed.

### **GEIS Timeline and Upcoming Milestones**

We are currently preparing the Draft GEIS. January 2024 is the target date for determining the adequacy of the Draft GEIS for public review. February - April 2024 is the estimated range for the public review and comment period. A public hearing will be hosted within that public comment period.

**Q:** I hear a lot of local questions about lighting. Is lighting planned for the waterfront portion of the project?

**A:** There are no lights planned on the Shoreline Trail; there will be low lights on the Breakneck Bridge for DEP vehicles that can be turned on and off. There will also be security lighting for parking areas and bathrooms and near the train station. There will be lighting for road signs where necessary. The park is otherwise a dawn to dusk facility and does not need lighting. Lighting will be Dark Sky compliant.

**Q:** Where are you with understanding road closure impacts on NY Route 9D due to construction? There will also be impacts from the work DOT and Central Hudson are doing in the tunnel, so this needs to be coordinated.

**A:** NYS Parks anticipates putting the Bridge out to bid in September with work to commence in the winter. Construction will take approximately two years. The selected contractor will develop an access plan to manage the closure. HHFT's owners rep (About the Work) and NYS Parks' construction manager will be leading coordination with the two construction teams, as well as DOT and Central Hudson.

***The meeting adjourned.***